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ABSTRACT

Many theoreticians have indicated that a major task of the nonpresumptive rhetor is to gain presumption, thereby shifting the burden of proof to the opposition. Rhetorically, Martin Luther King, Jr., sought to effect this shift in the burden of proof through the use of hierarchies of values. At the top of his value system was the love of God. The next level was the love between humans. A set of morals, established from this love, were then utilized as the criteria for defining justice, and justice was the authority for laws. Most of King's rhetoric attempted to take advantage of the fact that a religious hierarchy of values was predominant in the minds of most Americans. Another characteristic of King's rhetoric was the initiation of a proposition with a fact or truth, mediated with a transitional metaphor, and argued from a value stance. Not only did the rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr, address a myriad of propositions of fact, value, and policy, but it was also directed toward a heterogeneous society. Through his words and actions King shifted the burden of proof onto those who opposed racial equality. In the last analysis this may have been the most pronounced effect of his rhetoric. (HOD)

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PULPIT RESPONSES TO CONTEMPORARY ISSUES: THE ON-GOING RHETORIC OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING

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Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a man with a dream. A dream in which he saw his people freed from the binding "manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination."[1] As he battled to fulfill his dream, Dr. King was pitted against the forces of segregation and discrimination--forces which were, all to frequently, part of the status quo. Therefore, King often had to argue his case without the benefit of rhetorical presumption. As such diverse theorticians as Beale,[2] Minnick,[3] Perelman,[4] Warnick,[5] and Whately,[6] have indicated, a major task of the non-presumptive rhetor is to gain presumption, thereby shifting the burden of proof to the opposition.

Rhetorically, Dr. King sought to effect this shift in the burden of proof through the use of hierarchies of values. At the top of his value system was the love of God, or as King referred to this type of love in Greek, agape. The next level was the love between men, represented by philia and eros. A set of morals could be established from this love. Morals were then utilized as the criteria for defining justice, and justice was the authority for laws. Most of King's rhetoric attempted to take advantage of the fact that a religious hierarchy of values is predominent in the minds of most Americans. Wayne Minnick provides a list of "Religious values of contemporary Americans."[7] Of this list, number seven states: "They tend to judge people and events moralistically."[8] So, in his famous tretise Letter from Birmingham Jail, King initiated his argument with the proposition "But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here."[9] Other strategies are interspersed within the text, but his basic argument is as follows: Injustice is here because your laws are unjust. The laws are unjust because they are not moral. A moral law has to be based on love, and

segregation is the negation of love as it is separation. Furthermore, there is the strong implication that the negation of the love of man is also the negation of the love of God. King's immediate audience consisted of eight clergymen who had signed a pamphlet denouncing his tactics. King started his Letter by stating that he usually did not answer criticisms, but he would this time because these clergy were men of good will and were sincere. Rhetorically speaking, however, King had a much better reason. With clergy as his immediate audience, King could utilize his value hierarchy of religious belief to its fullest extent. He could gain the presumption on religious grounding--King's major tactic. Dr. King could use this situation to avoid a possible criticism which could reduce his ethos. As Minnick indicates, Americans "think religion and politics should not be mixed; ministers should stay out of politics, and politicians out of religious matters."[10] King was obviously aware of this prevalent attitude and continuously explained his position as being in the tradition of prophets and Jesus Christ.

In contrast to King's Christian hierarchy of values is a social hierarchy of means by which laws are established and justified. Of course, this system is based on voting for representatives who establish laws and regulations for the common good of the nation or state or municipality. In the Letter from Birmingham Jail King wisely avoided arguing on a political level, but elsewhere often did refer to the Constitution and to the doctrine of interposition and nullification which some states employed in an attempt to void the 1954 Supreme Court's decision of Brown v. Board of Education.[11] In his deliberative rhetoric Dr. King often pointed that some states were ignoring, or even trying to

counteract, federal law. However, the presumption of propositions of fact was not King's only rhetorial strategy.

In his book Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent, Wayne Booth discusses the fact-value split.[12] He contends that as of at least seventy-five years ago the fact-value split has been a truism. In terms of deliberation people will favor a fact over a value. He makes two lists of things that fact oriented people also accept. A few of the items under "scientismic" (fact) are: known facts, objectivity, reason, the proveable, the knowable, empiricism. Under the heading "irrationalists" (value) he lists: values (the important), persons, faith, mind, spirit, knowledge of the heart, wisdom, the prophet or seer. Although King, his movement, and philosophy fall into the latter list, he is careful to begin his propositions with information from the former--facts. Even when King was addressing a "friendly" audience, it must be remembered that he often carried a fairly heavy burden of proof because he was advocating nonviolence that sometimes led to violence, led to civil disobedience, led to jail, and went against the philosophy of the oldest and largest civil rights organization in the United States, the NAACP. The philosophy of the NAACP was based on the premise that the plight of the Negro could be best solved by improved education, and the best method of accomplishing its goals was through the legal system--the courts, litigation and the like. One of the main arguments used to discredit King was that his religious hierarchy of values begged the question. He understood the argument of the clergy in Birmingham when they said:

> We further strongly urge our own Negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations, and to unite locally in

> working peacefully for a better Brimingham. When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets. We appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense.[13]

In terms of avoiding the fault of begging the question Perelman suggests the following:

> Among the points of agreement from which the speaker draws the starting point for his discourse, it is important to distinguish those which bear upon reality (i.e. facts, truths, presumptions) from those which bear on the preferable (i.e. values, hierarchies, and loci of the preferable). Although language and common sense designate by the terms "facts" and "truths" objective elements which force themselves upon everyone, an analysis undertaken from an argumentative point of view does not allow us to neglect the attitude of the audience toward these "facts," unless we are prepared to commit a petitio principii.[14]

Very characteristic of King's rhetoric is the initiation of a proposition with a fact or truth, mediated with a transitional metaphor, and argued from a value stance. For example:

> Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation
>
> HISTORICAL FACT/TRUTH
>
> This momentuous decree came as a great beacon of light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice.
>
> USE OF METAPHOR TO COMBINE FACT WITH VALUE

It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity.

USE OF METAPHOR WITH SHIFT OF EMPHASIS TO VALUES

But one hundred years later, the Negro is still not free.

VALUE STATEMENT

One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.[15]

USE OF METAPHOR WITH EMPHASIS ON VALUE STATEMENT

When King presented this speech in Washington, D. C., he had a receptive, enthusiastic audience present so he did not have to prolong the factual part of his proposition before quickly moving into metaphor and values. In his Letter from Birmingham Jail he had, at least in large measure, an unfriendly and unenthusiastic audience. The critic can sense his delay. After a paragraphy of friendly introduction, he begins:

> I think I should indicate why I am here in Brimingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty-five affiliated organizations across the South, and one of them is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Frequently we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promise. So, I along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here.

I am here because I have organizational ties here.

FACTUAL AND SLOW PACED

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here.

FACT FOLLOWED BY VALUE STATEMENT

Just as the prophets of the eighth century B. C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their towns, and just as Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world

FACT OR TRUTH

so I am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town.[16]

VALUE STATEMENT

This latter statement asserts two propositions, being compelled by the precedent of Paul and carrying the gospel of freedom. While the technique of shifting from a fact or truth to a proposition of value is not necessarily unique to King, it is an effective tactic which helps a rhetor to adjust his proposition to his audience. As a final example, the following is the opening proposition of a speech presented to a well educated, mostly black, and agreeable audience. The Philosophy of the Student Nonviolent Movement was presented to the 1961 annual meeting of the Fellowship of the Concerned.

I have been asked to talk about the philosophy behind the student movement. There can be no gainsaying the fact that we confront a crisis in race relations in the United States.

FACTUAL AND TRUTH TO HIS AUDIENCE

The crisis in 1954 outlawing segregation in public schools has been precipitated on the one hand by the determined resistance of reactionary forces in the South to the Supreme Court's decision.

FACTUAL AND TRUTH TO HIS AUDIENCE

And we know that at times this resistance has risen to ominous proportions. At times we find the legislative halls of the South ringing loud with such words as "interposition" and "nullification."

FACT METAPHOR AND VALUE

And all these forces have developed into massive resistance. But we must also say that the crisis has been precipitated on the other hand by the determination of hundreds and thousands and millions of Negro people to achieve freedom and human dignity.

FACT BUT MOSTLY VALUE STATEMENTS

If the Negro stayed in his place and accepted discrimination and segregation, there would be no crisis.[17]

VALUE STATEMENT

In his book The Realm of Rhetoric Perelman mentions that Descartes' Discourse on Method added the final rule, "To make so complete an enumeration of the links in an argument, and to pass them all so thoroughly under review, that I could be sure I had missed nothing." But Perelman argues that this is fine in mathematics but is rather daring when considering philosophy.[18] King is using rhetoric not science to demonstrate his philosophy. Even though King is often explicit and factual, his greatest ideas are held within the interrelated association of values.

Many of the ideas and values of King are found again and again in his various speeches and writing. These are just a few which can be found throughout his rhetoric:

1. Three kinds of love: agape, eros, philia;
2. There are just laws and unjust laws;
3. A law is just if it is moral; if it is not moral it is my duty to break it;
4. The necessity of civil disobedience;
5. People in power do not give up their privileges willingly;
6. That time will take care of things is a myth; time is neutral;
7. Hitler's laws were legal;
8. Means are important not ends because means become the ends;
9. Segregation is immoral, unjust and therefore not legal;
10. We must have faith in the future;
11. 1954 Supreme Court decision, separate is not equal or moral;
12. The American Dream is not over--in some respects it is just beginning;
13. "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever; flowing stream," Amos 5:24;
14. Democracy can only be achieved by voting;
15. Nonviolent direct action is necessary, moral, just, lawful.

One question often asked by critics is whether or not the rhetoric has achieved the effect intended--was it successful? When the components of the rhetorical process are complicated this question is difficult if not impossible to answer. Not only did the rhetoric of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. address a myriad of propositions of fact, value, and

policy, it was directed toward a heterogeneous society. Dr. King had several levels of audience besides just the immediate and distant. One level included the ministers who provided religious leadership. An extension of this level was the faithful--the religious, church going sector of our society. Another level included the political leaders and those in power who influenced others and were the primary law makers. Yet another level consisted of members of various civil rights groups who wanted to effect a change in the racial situation. A last group included those who were ignorant of, or who did not care about, the injuries the policy of segregation caused. All of these groups, along with others were addressed by Dr. King in a widespread complex message which encompossed many kinds of arguments and analysis.

One evaluative dichotomy which is often mentioned in reference to Dr. King's rhetoric concerns his methods. It has been argued that these methods were effective in the South. There segregation laws were rescinded and the plight of Blacks was somewhat improved. Outside of the South, it has been said, King's activities were largely ignored and often caused more harm than good. If history were to prove this accessment to be totally true it would, upon reflection, still indicate a successful rhetorical effect.

Despite this somewhat conservative perspective, however, the passing of time and the events of history appears to foster three conclusions: First, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. helped us to become aware that we could apply religious values explicitly to our social structures in a forceful, dynamic way in order to effect profound changes in these structures. Second, his movement caused the tension needed to speed the process of changing our laws. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the

Voting Rights Bill are but two examples. And finally, he demonstrated by words and actions that it is sinful and socially destructive to carry passivity to the point of allowing hatred to overcome love.

Dr. King did not live to see his dream fulfilled. But his rhetoric did help, and is still helping, that dream to become a reality. Presumption has been shifted. The burden of proof is on those who would oppose racial equality. In the last analysis this may have been the most pronounced effect of his rhetoric.

END NOTES

[1]Arthur Smith and Stephen Robb, eds., The Voice of Black Rhetoric (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1971), pp. 184-188.

[2]Walter H. Beale, Real Writing (Dallas: Scott, Foresman & Company, 1982), pp. 90-105.

[3]Wayne C. Minnick, The Art of Persuasion (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).

[4]Chaim Perelman, The Realm of Rhetoric (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1982), pp. 21-32.

[5]Barbara Warnick, "Arguing Value Propositions," Journal of the American Forensic Association, 18 (Fall, 1981), 109-19.

[6]Richard Whately, Elements of Rhetoric (carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963).

[7]Minnick, pp. 218-220.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Martin Luther King, Jr., Why We Can't Wait (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 77-100.

[10]Minnick, pp. 218-220.

[11]347 U.S. 493 (1954) and 349 U.S. 294 (1955).

[12]Wayne C. Booth, Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1974), pp. 12-19.

[13]Charles Muscatine and Marlene Griffith, The Borzoi College Reader (New York: Knopf, 1971), pp. 329-30.

[14]Perelman, p. 23.

[15]Smith and Robb, pp. 184-188.

[16]King, Jr., pp. 77-100. An unrevised version of the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" may be found in The Borzoi College Reader cited above, pp. 331-45.

[17]Philip S. Foner, ed., The Voice of Black America (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), pp. 943-53.

[18]Perelman, p. 150.